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ABSTRACT

Noting that teachers' nonverbal behaviors are frequently inconsistent with their verbal messages, a situation that detracts from student learning, this paper offers an activity for focusing prospective teachers' attentions on the frequency and impact of discrepant verbal-nonverbal messages occurring in the classroom. The step-by-step process is outlined to show how teacher education students act out various types of teacher and student behaviors, then discuss the impact of the behaviors and compare their observations of what and how many discrepant verbal-nonverbal messages occurred. Variations of the activity are offered, including the use of tape recordings to distinguish whether nonverbal vocal or paralinguistic cues are discrepant with verbal messages, and the use of videotapes to distinguish whether nonverbal eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions in student-teacher interactions are discrepant with the verbal messages. A response sheet of bipolar adjectives is attached for recording observations/evaluations of "students" and "teachers" taking part in the activity. (RL)

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The Impact of Discrepant Verbal-nonverbal Messages in the Teacher-Student Interaction

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Goals

1. To focus attention on the frequency and impact of discrepant verbal-nonverbal messages in teacher-student interactions.
2. To focus attention on diverse communication settings (e.g. dyad, small group, large group) in which discrepant verbal-nonverbal messages occur in the classroom.

Group Size

Any size learning group. The activity is designed for dyads, small group or large groups.

Participants

Undergraduate and graduate teacher education majors.

Time Required

At least 60 minutes for each communication setting. The activity should be geared to subsequent class sessions to include the diverse communication settings in the classroom. However, the facilitator, if desired, could limit the activity to one specific communication setting (e.g. dyad).

Physical Setting

The regular classroom is adequate.

Materials

1. Chalk and chalkboard
2. Paper and pencils
3. Response Sheets

Objectives

1. The observers and/or participants will be able to identify discrepant verbal-nonverbal messages revealed in diverse teacher-student interactions (e.g. dyad, small group, large group settings).

2. The observers and/or participants will recognize when and how discrepant verbal-nonverbal messages can affect the student's perception of the credibility, interest, or trust of that teacher.

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Step-by-Step Process

1. The facilitator introduces the activity by providing a general orientation to the nature and importance of communication in society. The facilitator, if desired, can provide a general overview of related factors in the communication process (e.g. sender, receiver, feedback, communication breakdown).

2. The facilitator designates two class members (one teacher, one student) to participate in dyad setting; seven to ten class members (one teacher, the rest of the participants are the students) to participate in small group setting; and fifteen to twenty class members (one teacher, the rest of the participants are the students) to participate in the large group setting. The teacher assigned to each setting can choose or be assigned a particular grade level (K-12) and specific content area to teach. The lessons (25-40 minutes) associated with each communication setting can be prepared ahead of the scheduled class session or be assigned by the facilitator at the scheduled class meeting.

3. Prior to each teacher-student interaction in the diverse communication settings, the participant who is the teacher will leave the room so that the facilitator can assign the participant(s) who are the students various behaviors which will be assumed throughout the role play. These assigned behaviors, appropriate to the selected grade level, can be designated by the facilitator, participant(s) who are the students in that communication setting or the remaining observers in the class. The following is a partial list of diverse behaviors for the participants who have assumed the role of student(s) that might be assigned:

a. The student who does not readily understand the content being presented. That student can respond by 1) asking questions throughout the entire lesson 2) never answering questions correctly when called upon 3) continually saying, "I don't understand. . . ." and/or 4) assuming the role of the "slow learner."
b. The student who is bored with the lesson. That student can respond by 1) distracting other students and/or 2) generally not paying attention to lecture or activities, as evidenced by his/her wandering from the lesson, either physically or mentally, that is, finding something else to do which seems to be of more interest.

c. The student who knows all the answers. That student can respond by 1) blurting out answers 2) raising his/her hand with accompanying noises to indicate, "I know the answer. . . ." and/or 3) assuming the role of the "gifted" student.

d. The student who is quiet or unresponsive a major portion of the class time. That student can respond by 1) solely nodding his/her head to indicate yes/no responses and/or 2) responding as briefly as possible to the question.

e. The student who is a discipline problem. That student can respond by 1) being physically active 2) being obnoxious in his/her verbal messages, especially towards other classmates and/or 3) conveying non-verbal messages which distract other class members.

Following the assignment of these behaviors or others, the facilitator passes out the response sheets (see example of response sheet) which uses a semantic differential scale to rate the teacher and student behaviors. The observers will check the response which indicates the adjective that best typifies the teacher and student(s) behaviors in each teacher-student interaction. The observers can respond during or after the teacher-student interaction is completed. After the interaction is completed, the facilitator will give response sheets to the participants so that they may also provide their insights regarding teacher and student behaviors.

4. At this point, the participant who is the teacher in that specific communication setting re-enters the room. The teacher sets up the classroom (e.g. physical layout of chairs, desks etc.). The participants who are the students assume assigned behaviors, as the lesson begins. The remaining class members observe that teacher-student interaction.

5. Response sheets should be filled out by the teacher, student(s), and observers after the completion of the lesson. At this time, the facilitator also asks the class members to take a piece of paper and indicate the discrepant verbal-nonverbal behaviors they noted in the diverse communication setting(s). After the response sheets and list of discrepant verbal-nonverbal behaviors is completed, the facilitator uses the chalkboard to indicate the following:

a. Given the bipolar adjectives, the facilitator tallies the number of class members who responded to the designated points between those adjectives. Given the example, interested 1 ; 2 ; 3 ; 4 ; 5 ; 6 ; 7 uninterted, how many class members marked 1, 2, or 3 etc. A general consensus as to whether or not the teacher or student(s) were interested will become apparent. Thus, some indication of why the teacher, in particular, or student(s) might have been discrepant in his/her behavior can be derived.

b. The facilitator lists, on the chalkboard, those discrepant verbal-nonverbal behaviors in each teacher-student interaction that the observers, teacher, or participant(s) have listed on their paper. Further discussion regarding verbal-nonverbal behaviors and how discrepancy affects how the student(s) perceive the teacher (e.g. interested, honest, trustworthy) should be promoted by the facilitator or class members. For example, the teacher said, "Yes, John, I'll help you," but wasn't positive in his/her nonverbal behaviors, in that the vocal or puralinguistic cues didn't indicate sincerity, support, or helpfulness nor did the teacher's lack of eye contact, while speaking. Although the verbal message was positive, the nonverbal messages were not.

Variations

1. Use a tape recording of teacher-student interactions (e.g. dyad, small or large group) in various classrooms to distinguish whether or not the nonverbal vocal or paralinguistic cues are discrepant or in accord with the verbal messages.

2. Use a video tape of teacher-student interactions to distinguish whether or not the nonverbal eye contact, gestures and/or facial expressions are discrepant or in accord with the verbal messages.

Commentary

This activity is powerful in that it develops an acute awareness of the impact of discrepant verbal-nonverbal messages with regard to trust and other related factors. Certainly, this impact can be assessed in teacher-student interactions in the classroom. More important is the fact than even "subtle" discrepant messages can be readily perceived by the students, affecting their perceptions of the teacher (Beatty and Beatty, 1976). The frequency with which nonverbal teacher behaviors that are inconsistent with the verbal messages occur in the classroom is high (Grant and Hennings, 1971). Given this contention, the importance of developing an awareness and realization of the impact of discrepant verbal-nonverbal messages especially with undergraduates who are studying to be teachers and graduates who are already teaching, should be apparent.

Further evidence also indicates that many teachers function with a verbal consciousness rather than a nonverbal consciousness, thus remaining unaware of the relationship between these two communication patterns (Grant and Hennings). Again,

the importance of developing the awareness of teachers and potential teachers should be apparent. When provided with such insights, possibly more effective dyads, small, or large group communication and instruction could be enhanced due to the teacher's awareness of the relationship between his/her communication patterns.

References

Beatty, P. J. and Beatty, Michael. "An Investigation of the Believability of Verbal Messages Accompanied by Inconsistent Paralinguistic Cues," Reading Improvement, 13, 1976, 105-107.

Grant, Barbara and Hennings, Dorothy. The Teacher Moves. New York: Columbia University, 1971.

Hall, Edward. The Silent Language. New York: Doubleday, 1959.

Response Sheet

The teacher in the teacher-student interaction was:

nice	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	awful
kind	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	cruel
interested	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	uninterested
helpful	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	unhelpful
believable	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	unbelievable
just	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	unjust
partial	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	impartial
professional	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	unprofessional
pleasant	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	unpleasant
energetic	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	tired
aggressive	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	meek
objective	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	subjective
open-minded	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	close-minded
trustworthy	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	untrustworthy
cheerful	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	gloomy
friendly	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	unfriendly

The student(s) in the teacher-student interaction was:

energetic	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	tired
aggressive	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	meek
cheerful	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	gloomy
pleasant	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	unpleasant
interested	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	uninterested
nice	___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___; ___;	awful

Note: Other related bipolar adjectives can be added to the response sheet, if desired.